

WHAT IS THE LAW ENFORCEMENT TORCH RUN?

Each year, law enforcement officers from around the state raise money for Special Olympics Georgia (SOGA) by conducting the Law Enforcement Torch Run (LETR). Since 1987, when the Georgia Torch Run began, it has grown consistently every year.

How It Works

LETR involves hundreds of law enforcement officers from agencies throughout the state who take part in a 1,000 mile, two week torch relay to pass the Special Olympics Georgia "Flame of Hope" across the State. From January through June, officers raise funds for the honor of being a Torch Bearer in the Torch Run. The top five money raising departments actually run the "Flame of Hope" into the Opening Ceremony and the top fundraising department will light the Caldron to signal the beginning of the State Games.

The History

The Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics, the largest grassroots fundraising program for the cause, began in 1981 when Wichita, Kansas Police Chief Richard LaMunyon saw an urgent need to raise funds for and increase awareness of Special Olympics.

The idea for the Torch Run was to provide local law enforcement officers with an opportunity to volunteer with Special Olympics in the communities where the officers lived and worked. After three years of successful run in Kansas, Chief LaMunyon presented his idea to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, which endorsed Special Olympics as its official charity through the Torch Run. Today, all 50 states and over 40 countries have their own versions of the Torch Run.

The Purpose

In addition to formally guarding the "Flame of Hope" for Special Olympics, Law Enforcement officers help raise awareness and fund through the Torch Run. More than 15,000 volunteers are needed each year to conduct Special Olympics Georgia programs. The LETR activities in communities across Georgia increase public awareness and understanding of Special Olympics.

The Law Enforcement Torch Run is the largest fundraiser for Special Olympics Georgia. More than 6,500 athletes from throughout Georgia will participate in one of the State Games and Competitions conducted by Special Olympics Georgia. For a few days, these children and adults with intellectual disabilities will get to compete in a high quality sports competition, interact with their peers, and experience new places. Participation in the State Games also means that these athletes are focusing on a goal, learning new skills, and developing healthy habits that may lead to improved overall health.

The State Games and Competitions will require more than \$750,000 in cash and an additional \$300,000 of in-kind goods and services. While there are many corporate sponsors for these games, the funds raised from companies cover only half of the expenses. Funds raised through the Law Enforcement Torch Run help offset the expenses of State Games and are specifically used for facility rental, housing, meals, equipment rental and purchase, officials fees, and medals. Your help is vital to the continuation of the Special Olympics Georgia!

SPECIAL OLYMPICS GEORGIA HISTORY

Special Olympics Georgia (SOGA) was founded in 1970 in conjunction with the Special Olympics movement that was begun in Washington, D.C. in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver. In its early years, SOGA was run by volunteers and in conjunction with the Georgia State Department of Natural Resources. By 1975, Special Olympics Georgia had a staff person who worked with a few hundred athletes and conducted competitions in only a few sports. SOGA has grown to serve 22,350. Athletes train year-round for competition in 23 sports which are patterned after the Olympic Games and held annually at each organizational level including five Statewide events. More than 500 games, meets, and tournaments are held in communities throughout Georgia. Every two years, SOGA sends athletes to compete internationally at the Special Olympics World Summer and Winter Games. An officer from the SOGA LETR usually participates in the World Games Final Leg Law Enforcement Torch Run.

Special Olympics is distinctive in that it works to accommodate competitors at all ability levels in order to give everyone a reasonable opportunity to win. It does this by assigning all athletes to competition divisions based on previous performances and/or preliminary heats. Athletes from all divisions may advance to Area, State, Regional and World Games.

The goal of SOGA is to help bring persons with mental retardation into the larger society under conditions whereby they are accepted, respected, and given the chance to become useful and productive citizens. Special Olympics Georgia contributes to the physical, social, and psychological development of people with intellectual disabilities. Through successful experiences in sports, athletes gain confidence and build a positive self-image, which carries over into the classroom, the home, the job, and the community. In addition, involvement with SOGA strengthens families, causing a richer appreciation of talents, increased level of pride, and greater support between the Special Olympics athletes, siblings, and parents. Also, the community at large is united in understanding people with intellectual disabilities in an environment of equality, respect, and acceptance.

Specifically, participation in SOGA programs can address several needs of people with intellectual disabilities:

- It provides a safe arena for peer interaction. Often, after students leave the school system, they also leave their peer network, which limits the opportunities and events to network with peers. Such isolation can ultimately hinder the development of social skills and those skills needed to work or live independently.
- Participation in Special Olympics builds self-awareness, teamwork, and discipline. All of which are needed for steady employment and independent living.
- The Surgeon General released information in 2001 about the poor health of people with intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics engages the athletes in regular, monitored physical activity, which can ultimately help with combating heart disease, obesity, etc. It is common knowledge that exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. However, people with intellectual disabilities do not usually join community recreation leagues or even have friends they can go 'work out' with. Special Olympics offers a platform for the athletes to stay physically fit.